

The Returns to Relentless Effort

There is no shortage of claims about how best to improve schools serving disadvantaged students. It's conventionally argued that reducing class size, increasing per-pupil spending, and ramping up the share of teachers with advanced degrees will deliver better outcomes. Does this traditional account stand up when one carefully explores the everyday inner workings of schools?

A new study of 35 New York charter schools by Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr. suggests that it doesn't. Taking advantage of the lotteries used to allocate students to these schools, and drawing on in-depth interviews, surveys, lesson plans, and videotaped classroom observations, Dobbie and Fryer were able to estimate the causal effects of each year of school attendance on children's achievement. These estimates took the usual suspect variables into account (class size, levels of teacher certification, and per-pupil expenditures) but found that they simply weren't driving achievement.

What was? Five factors stood out: frequent teacher feedback, the use of data to guide instruction, high-dosage tutoring, increased instructional time, and high expectations. According to Dobbie and Fryer, the results validate what 40 years of qualitative educational research has suggested: That focused, intentional, and relentless effort on the part of educators can improve the academic prospects of low-income children.

Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr. 2011. "Getting Beneath the Veil of Effective Schools: Evidence from New York City." *NBER Working Paper No. 17632*. For more details, see <http://www.nber.org/digest/mar12/w17632.html>.

Fade to Black

The famous *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision provided the legal foundation for ending racial segregation in U.S. public schools. Although school desegregation did decline substantially since that 1954 decision, recent changes in the law have released many school districts from court-ordered desegregation plans. Have past gains in racial and ethnic school integration remained intact despite such legal changes? Or are schools now drifting back to a more segregated regime?

In new research by Sean F. Reardon, Elena Tej Grewal, Demetra Kalogrides, and Erica Greenberg, the main story is one of a drift back to a more segregated past. Examining 450 large school districts between the early 1990s and today, Reardon and his colleagues uncovered significant increases in White-Black segregation within districts that were released from their plans, as compared to those that remained under court-ordered desegregation plans. This backward drift was especially prominent in Southern school districts.

These results reveal the powerful pro-segregation forces that remain at work even now. The new segregation levels may pale in comparison to what prevailed prior to the *Brown* decision, but it's nonetheless clear that, absent continuing court oversight, the impulse toward segregation remains dominant.

Sean F. Reardon, Elena Tej Grewal, Demetra Kalogrides, and Erica Greenberg. Forthcoming. "Brown Fades: The End of Court-Ordered School Desegregation and the Resegregation of American Public Schools." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. For more details, see <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/pam.21649>.

Holes in the Social Safety Net

The Unemployment Insurance (UI) system, which provides assistance to workers who have lost their jobs, has been critical in reducing hardship in the recent recession and in the subsequent slow recovery. Given that Black and Latino workers have been hit especially hard by the downturn, it's important to assess whether the UI system is working well for them. Are Blacks and Latinos receiving unemployment benefits at the rate one would expect?

Apparently not. According to a new report from the Urban Institute's Austin Nichols and Margaret Simms, unemployed Black workers have the lowest receipt of UI among all racial and ethnic groups. In 2010, only 23.8 percent of Black unemployed workers received UI, as compared to 33.2 percent of White unemployed workers. The corresponding percentage of Latinos is 29.2 percent.

What accounts for these differences in UI receipt? To some extent, they arise from variations in eligibility; indeed, Black workers often have employment histories that make it more

difficult to establish UI eligibility. But Nichols and Simms find that differences in UI receipt persist even after accounting for education, past employment history, and reasons for unemployment. It follows that eligibility alone is not the full story. While Blacks may be less likely than Whites to apply for benefits, another possibility is that employers are more likely to contest claims made by Black workers.

The upshot is that we don't yet know why the difference obtains. However, whatever the sources may be, we do know that the safety net isn't fully delivering for unemployed Blacks and that they're likely experiencing economic hardship as a result.

Austin Nichols and Margaret Simms. 2012. "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Receipt of Unemployment Insurance Benefits during the Great Recession." Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute. For more details, see <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412596-Racial-and-Ethnic-Differences-in-Receipt-of-Unemployment-Insurance-Benefits-During-the-Great-Recession.pdf>.

Bankruptcy Scars

When debt becomes overwhelming, personal bankruptcy is an option that some debtors may take to “clear the decks.” It’s well known, however, that exercising this option comes with a real price in the form of reduced access to future low-cost loans for buying education, homes, cars, and more. Although this effect on access to future credit is widely appreciated, we don’t know whether bankruptcy also scars people in other domains, such as the labor market.

Using long-term data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Michelle Maroto finds that the scarring effects of bankruptcy do indeed cross over to the labor market, bringing about further penalties in the form of reduced hours and lower wages (following the bankruptcy). These penalties obtain even in the presence of controls for prior employment history and other variables that distinguish those who declare bankruptcy and could, as a result, create the false appearance of a crossover bankruptcy effect. Although one can never rule out an omitted variable account, the negative effect on hours and wages persisted in Maroto’s analyses despite the application of all plausible controls.

Why might there be such cross-domain scarring? The causal mechanism is in fact quite clear: Because employers are often allowed to check credit reports during the hiring process, a past bankruptcy may be discovered and then color the employment decision. If this hypothesis is accurate, it suggests that Maroto’s cross-domain effect may indeed be causal.

Michelle Maroto. 2012. “The Scarring Effects of Bankruptcy: Cumulative Disadvantage Across Credit and Labor Markets.” *Social Forces*, 91(1), 99–130.

Is Eviction the New Incarceration?

It’s well known that residents of poor neighborhoods experience especially high rates of residential mobility. It might be supposed that such instability arises mainly from evictions; when tenants are evicted, they are of course forced to move, contributing to higher residential instability. But just how prevalent is eviction in poor neighborhoods? Who is likely to experience eviction? And does eviction lead to homelessness, relocation to worse neighborhoods, and a general downward spiral?

Using a mixed-methods study of administrative, survey, and ethnographic data in Milwaukee, Matthew Desmond provides new and important answers to these questions. First, Desmond finds that evictions are quite prevalent in Milwaukee, with 7.2 percent of those renting in high-poverty neighborhoods experiencing an eviction in a given year. Second, evictions were more common in minority neighborhoods, especially Black neighborhoods. Third, whereas women and men were evicted at roughly equal rates in White

neighborhoods, Desmond’s research shows that women were disproportionately likely to be evicted in Black and Hispanic areas. The eviction rate of female renters from Black neighborhoods was approximately 1.9 times that of male renters from those neighborhoods.

In his ethnographic analysis, Desmond finds that eviction leads to a downward spiral for poor Black women, just as incarceration does for poor Black men. The twofold cost of eviction is that (a) landlords typically will not rent to those with an eviction record, and (b) evicted tenants often have to pay storage fees for their belongings (fees that, when unpaid, ultimately lead to confiscation). As a result, evicted tenants fall to the bottom of the rental market, ending up in run-down properties and dangerous neighborhoods. These results suggest that eviction is a “poverty trigger” for Black women much as incarceration is for Black men.

Matthew Desmond. 2012. “Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 118(5), 88–133.

The Long Shadow of the Great Recession

Although it’s rarely good to lose a job, there may be times when the costs of losing a job are at least a bit smaller. Is it better, for example, to lose a job during a time of mass layoffs and a widespread acceptance of structural accounts of unemployment? Or is it better to lose a job when the economy is doing well and jobs are plentiful?

In a new analysis of long-term earnings, Steven J. Davis and Till M. von Wachter have shown that timing does matter; indeed it matters as much *when* a job loss occurs as whether there’s a job loss at all. Using Social Security records of worker earnings from 1974–2008, the authors show that displacement is less costly when it occurs during periods of low unemployment. When unemployment is below 6 percent, displaced men lose only 1.4 years of pre-displacement earnings over the course of the next 20 years. However, when the same job loss occurs in an economic downturn (i.e., unemployment above 8 percent), the displaced worker loses some 2.8 years of pre-displacement earnings over the next 20 years.

When it comes to losing a job, then, severe economic contractions like the Great Recession tend to impose roughly twice the earnings penalty on those affected. This result suggests that the Great Recession may turn out to have been an especially costly time to have lost a job.

Steven J. Davis and Till M. von Wachter. 2011. “Recessions and the Cost of Job Loss.” *NBER Working Paper* No. 17638. For more details, see <http://www.nber.org/digest/apr12/w17638.html>.